UNCW
WILMINGTON CRIME SURVEY
2003

by

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Overview

The UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey was conducted in mid-April, 2003.
Representatives from the Wilmington Police Department, along with the UNCW research team, helped to design the original UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey, first conducted in February, 1999. The second UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey was completed in 2001. This study is the third UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey completed to date. A copy of the questionnaire used in the 2003 UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey appears in Appendix B of this report.

As in the previous studies, students from UNCW conducted telephone interviews following careful instruction in a training workshop. The 2003 UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey interviewed 201 randomly selected Wilmington residents. (By comparison, the 2001 survey interviewed 445 Wilmington residents and the 1999 survey interviewed 482 residents.) Residents living outside the city limits have been excluded from each of the three surveys. A more complete description of the survey methods is detailed later in this report.

Selected Findings

This section discusses selected findings from the UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey. Comparisons with the 2001 and 1999 surveys are made when appropriate, *although caution is advised when comparing responses across the three time periods* (see methodological caveat at end of report). Four areas are discussed: 1) fear of crime, 2) public disorder, 3) crime victimization, 4) and perceptions of the Wilmington Police Department. Additional findings from this survey and previous surveys are available upon request.

I   FEAR OF CRIME

Interviewers asked Wilmington residents a number of questions to gauge their feelings of fear of crime (see Appendix B). The questions used are standard items in the criminological literature. Judging from the overall responses to the questions, Wilmington residents whom we surveyed do not appear to be overly fearful of crime. For instance, more than 50 percent of the respondents indicated that they are "not at all afraid" of being assaulted by someone who has a weapon (53%), of being robbed (59%), or of being sexually assaulted (61%). Forty-four percent of the respondents said they were not at all afraid of having someone break into their homes. When combined with respondents who indicated that they were only "somewhat afraid," over 80 percent of the respondents we spoke with indicated they experienced either no fear or low fear of crime.

While the majority of Wilmington residents surveyed are not overly fearful of crime victimization, the results displayed in Table 1 (also graphically displayed in Appendix A) indicate that at least some Wilmington residents are quite fearful of crime victimization (7 to 20 percent for several crime categories). Interestingly, Table 1 shows that respondents are *less* likely over the years to say that they are "very afraid" of crime.

Table 1   Percent of Citizens Very Afraid of Different Types of Victimizations

Question	% "very afraid"		
How afraid are you of . . .	**2003**	**2001**	**1999**
. . . being attacked by someone who has a weapon?	**11%**	**18%**	**20%**
. . . being robbed while on the street?	**7%**	**12%**	**15%**
. . . being raped or sexually assaulted?	**12%**	**13%**	**15%**
. . . having someone break into your home?	**16%**	**16%**	**20%**
. . . having a loved one attacked by someone with a weapon?	**20%**	**23%**	**NA***

* Question not asked in survey

A question added to the 2001 survey and repeated in 2003 asks respondents about their fear of having a loved one victimized by a violent crime. Interestingly, Wilmington residents surveyed are more afraid that a loved one will be victimized by a violent crime than they are for their own personal safety. Table 1 shows that 20 percent, or one in five respondents, said they are "very afraid" for their loved ones. Research on fear of crime published in the professional literature suggests that this *altruistic fear* is common and is felt especially by parents for the welfare of their children, even for their adult children living outside the home.

Several other measures of fear of crime appear in the survey. Residents were asked "Is there any area right around your home – that is, within a mile – where you would be afraid to walk alone *at night*?" A similar question asked respondents about their fear of walking alone *during the day*. Table 2 displays the results for the UNCW Wilmington Crime Surveys. Residents are approximately three times more likely to experience fear of walking alone at night than during the day. Such a difference is to be expected -- fear tends to vary substantially by time of day, as does actual crime itself. Residents perceive that nighttime is the most dangerous in terms of crime. Once again, at least for the Wilmington residents that we surveyed in 2003, fear of crime seems to be lower than what we found in the previous surveys.

Table 2   Fear of Walking Alone in Your Neighborhood

Is there any area right around your home – that is, within a mile – where you would be afraid to walk alone . . .	% "yes"		
	2003	**2001**	**1999**
. . . at night?	**43%**	**52%**	**58%**
. . . during the day?	**13%**	**14%**	**19%**

Another measure of fear of crime comes from the question: "In the past year, would you say your fear of crime has gone up, gone down or remained about the same?" Over three-quarters (77%) of Wilmington residents that we surveyed in 2003 said their fear of crime had either "gone down" or had "remained about the same" in the past year (table not shown). By comparison, 74 percent of the respondents in the 2001 survey, and only 56 percent in 1999 survey, indicated that their fear of crime had either gone down or remained about the same in the past year.

Data from the 2003 Wilmington Crime Survey paint a more optimistic picture of fear of crime in the local area than the 2001 and 1999 surveys. This "stabilization" of fear may be directly related to a national decline in the rate of crime. A decrease in fear of crime locally may stem from productive patrol strategies by area law enforcement agencies or effective crime prevention programs at the community level. Because of methodological constraints discussed elsewhere in this report, we caution against reading too much into the comparisons of statistics across the three time periods. The trends we identify here rely on residents' perceptions and are therefore not conclusive.

II   PUBLIC DISORDER

Closely related to feelings of fear of crime are citizens' perceptions of public disorder, commonly referred to as "incivilities." Research demonstrates that it is not necessarily the serious violent crimes that people fear most in their everyday lives but rather the more mundane types of public disorder that signal an erosion of traditional norms and values. Low-level breaches of community standards are important social cues. Importantly, it is these incivilities that the police have the ability to control through effective patrol strategies and community policing.

Table 3   Perceptions of Public Disorder in Neighborhood

Question	% "somewhat" or "serious" problem		
How great a problem is . . .	**2003**	**2001**	**1999**
. . . trash and litter lying around?	21%	36%	35%
. . . disruptive neighbors?	17%	27%	25%
. . . graffiti in your neighborhood?	3%	5%	6%
. . . vacant houses in your neighborhood?	5%	13%	10%
. . . people USING drugs in public?	13%	17%	NA*
. . . people SELLING drugs in public?	9%	18%	NA*
. . . suspicious strangers in your neighborhood?	23%	29%	34%
. . . groups hanging out in your neighborhood?	13%	14%	NA*
. . . guns in your neighborhood?	8%	11%	NA*
. . . lack of trust among your neighbors?	8%	17%	NA*
. . . speeding or reckless driving in your neighborhood?	44%	55%	56%

* Question not asked in survey

To measure perceptions of public disorder, respondents were asked "How great a problem" eleven potential concerns were in their neighborhoods. Table 3 displays the percentages of those who indicated that the item was "somewhat" or a "serious" problem to them. Comparisons to similar items asked of respondents in the 2001 and 1999 surveys are also displayed in the table. What is most striking is the substantial variation across the eleven items. As we found in previous surveys, traffic again tops the list of neighborhood concerns. Nearly half of the respondents polled (44%) indicated that "speeding or reckless driving" was either somewhat or a serious problem in their neighborhood. Also of concern to residents: "suspicious strangers," "trash and litter" and "disruptive neighbors." Many of these same items were of concern to residents in the earlier surveys.

III   CRIME VICTIMIZATION

Official crime rates for the city of Wilmington are consistently higher than the national average. They are also higher than one would expect among cities its size. According to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports for the year 2000, Wilmington's Part I Index (comprised of the eight crimes of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson) was 11,632 per 100,000, or nearly three times the national rate of 4,121 per 100,000. As a point of comparison, the rate of serious crime in Wilmington for the year 2000 was also higher than Raleigh, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Fayetteville. While the accuracy of the FBI data is not without its critics, one may reasonably conclude that the city of Wilmington experiences a considerable amount of crime.

The UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey measures crime in Wilmington quite differently from the FBI data. Rather than relying on official police reports, the survey directly asks residents about their personal victimization experiences. Research has demonstrated that victimization surveys provide reliable and accurate estimates of crime. Victimization surveys also have the advantage of identifying crimes that do not come to the attention of the police, and therefore are not counted in the FBI Uniform Crime Report.

Table 4 shows that 17 percent of the residents polled in 2003 said that they or someone in their household had been victimized by crime *in the past year*. The survey did not probe the nature of the victimization experience so we are unable to determine exactly what types of crimes have been committed against the respondents. Although 17 percent (or nearly one in six Wilmington residents) appears to be a fairly high rate of victimization, this rate is roughly equivalent to the rate of household victimization found nationwide in the government-sponsored National Crime Victimization Survey.

An additional question asked respondents if any of their neighbors had been the victim of crime. Over one quarter (26%) of the residents we polled said their neighbors had been victimized by crime in the past year (see Table 4). Questions that ask about perceptions of *neighborhood* crime are prone to be less reliable than measures of *personal* victimization for a variety of reasons (e.g., inaccurate information, rumor, vague neighborhood boundary, telescoping time frame). Nonetheless, this result suggests that crime touches the lives of many Wilmington residents.

Table 4   Victim of Crime in Previous Year by Household and Neighbor's Victimization

Question	% "yes"		
	2003	2001	1999
In the past year, have you or anyone else in your household been the victim of crime?	17%	20%	17%
Have any of your neighbors been the victim of crime in the past year?	26%	31%	33%

IV   PERCEPTIONS OF THE WILMINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

A major objective of the UNCW Wilmington Crime Survey is to study citizens' perceptions of the Wilmington Police Department. Respondents are asked to evaluate the police department on a number of specific items, and then to give their overall assessment of the police department.

Wilmington residents who were polled for the 2003 survey rated the Wilmington Police Department favorably. Nearly 9 out of every 10 respondents (89%) indicated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" when asked the following question: "Overall, how satisfied are you with the Wilmington Police Department?" Conversely, only 3 percent of the respondents said that they were "very dissatisfied" with the Wilmington Police Department. This rate of approval is nearly identical to the overall approval rating found in the 2001 survey (86%) and the 1999 survey (also 86%).

Perceptions of the Wilmington Police Department may be more closely examined with additional survey items. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to a series of statements about the police department. Approval ratings range from a low of 73 percent (two questions measuring fairness when dealing with teenagers and with college students) to 94 percent (responsive to local issues). Table 5 summarizes the percentages of Wilmington residents who responded favorably to each of the items. Note that the approval ratings closely parallel the findings from the previous two surveys.

Although the Wilmington residents reported high levels of approval for the Wilmington Police Department, a finding repeated in each of the three surveys conducted to date, we must make note that approval ratings are not equally high across all socio-demographic groups. In particular, white respondents tend to a give higher approval rating of the Wilmington Police Department than African-American respondents. This finding was confirmed in both the 1999 survey and 2001 survey (too few African Americans were included in the 2003 survey for meaningful analysis – see following section). On a national level we also find that white

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Americans are generally more likely to rate the police highly on satisfaction surveys. For instance, in a 2003 national Gallup poll, 65 percent of white respondents indicated that they had either a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the police while only 43 percent of African-American respondents indicated likewise. Thus, satisfaction levels with the police vary by race not only locally but nationwide as well.

Table 5   Perceptions of the Wilmington Police Department

In general, the Wilmington Police Department is . . .	% who "agree" or "strongly agree"		
	2003	**2001**	**1999**
. . . responsive to local issues	**94%**	**85%**	**NA***
. . . doing a good job with problems that really concern people in the neighborhood	**80%**	**79%**	**NA***
. . . doing a good job in responding to people who have been victims of crime	**86%**	**85%**	**NA***
. . . polite and courteous	**87%**	**NA***	**87%**
. . . effective at keeping order on the streets	**88%**	**NA***	**84%**
. . . effective at apprehending criminals	**77%**	**NA***	**80%**
. . . effective at using personnel & equipment	**82%**	**83%**	**86%**
. . . effective at enforcing traffic regulations	**77%**	**79%**	**71%**
. . . fair when dealing with people in general	**83%**	**NA***	**85%**
. . . fair when dealing with minorities	**77%**	**76%**	**80%**
. . . fair when dealing with teenagers	**73%**	**NA***	**76%**
. . . fair when dealing with college students	**73%**	**NA***	**76%**

* Question not asked in survey

Methodology for the 2003 Survey

The telephone survey was conducted over a two-week period in April 2003. UNCW students participating in a class project completed 201 interviews of Wilmington residents. Students were required to attend a training workshop to become familiar with the survey instrument and to develop proficiency with the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) program.

A computer program randomly generated the telephone numbers for the study. Random selection of phone numbers includes both listed and unlisted numbers and thus maximizes the thoroughness of the sample. Only Wilmington residents were eligible to participate in the study. Citizens residing outside the city's incorporated area were excluded from the study by way of a screening question.

Interviews were conducted over weekday evenings and on one Sunday afternoon to increase the probability of reaching residents at home. Interviews took approximately eight minutes to complete. The sample has a response rate of 45 percent and a margin of error of plus or minus 7 percent. (Note: methodological information for the 2001 and 1999 UNCW Wilmington Crime Surveys is available upon request from the authors.)

Methodological Caveat for the 2003 Survey

Care was taken to ensure a truly random selection of city residents. Our goal was to have the random sample of Wilmington residents closely approximate the race, gender and ethnic composition of the city. The final sample size, however, is not large by scientific standards. The proportion of African American residents surveyed was only 7 percent, falling well below the 26 percent representation of African Americans living in the city of Wilmington (2000 Census). Males also are underrepresented in the survey (34% males, 66% females). As a result of these methodological limitations, we are not able to provide breakdowns of questionnaire items on the 2003 based on race or gender because subcategories have too few cases for meaningful analysis. Findings reported herein are limited to the total sample. Finally, caution must be exercised against reading too much into the comparisons of statistics across the three time periods. The trends we identify here are merely suggestive and not conclusive.

APPENDIX A

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Wilmington Crime Survey

Graphic Displays

APPENDIX B

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Questionnaire and Sample Frequency Distributions

(percentages in **bold** print)